

## India via Trinidad and Canada: Negotiating Hospitality in Shani Mootoo's Short Stories

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Résumé de l'article

“Out on Main Street” and “The Upside-downness of the World as it Unfolds,” two stories from Shani Mootoo’s 1993 collection, explore how Canada functions as an interface between the Indian diaspora and its originary cultures. The stories play on dominant impulses to assign ethnic belonging based on skin colour, and Jacques Derrida’s reading of the contradictions inherent in (conditional) hospitality can help us tease out the implications of welcome offered to, and perceived by, Mootoo’s misread and racialized Indo-Trinidadian narrators. These stories illuminate how “India” travels from one diaspora (Trinidad) to another (Canada) and how face-to-face urban encounters enable the consolidation of “Indianness” in Canada. More specifically, they shed light on the processes through which diasporic Indians and white Canadians reproduce norms of Indianness and how these norms erase histories and distinctions within the broader Indian diaspora. Ultimately, Mootoo counters the way skin colour is “read” in Vancouver, and the asymmetries of intercultural encounter in these stories stress the need for a historicized and contextualized understanding of the multiplicity of Indian diasporas in Canada.

# India via Trinidad and Canada: Negotiating Hospitality in Shani Mootoo's Short Stories

CHANDRIMA CHAKRABORTY

I have lived that moment of the scattering of the people that in other times and other places, in the nations of others, becomes a time of gathering. Gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees; gathering on the edge of "foreign" cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafés of city centres; . . . gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present.

— Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* 199

MANY OF THE STORIES in Shani Mootoo's *Out on Main Street* (1993) offer compelling accounts of the experiences of Indo-Trinidadian immigrants in Canada. This essay analyzes two stories from the collection, "Out on Main Street" and "The Upside-downness of the World as it Unfolds," that reveal how Canada functions as a productive interface between the diaspora and its originary cultures, in this case Trinidad and India.<sup>1</sup> While other stories in *Out on Main Street*, such as "A Garden of One's Own" and "Sushila's Bhakti," illustrate immigrant endeavours to refashion the private space of the home in response to new settings, "Out on Main Street" and "Upside-downness" explicitly call attention to public sites and public encounters.<sup>2</sup> The everyday experiences of hospitality/hostility conveyed by the Indo-Trinidadian lesbian narrators in "Out on Main Street" and "Upside-downness" illuminate how "India" travels from one diaspora (Trinidad) to another (Canada), and how face-to-face urban encounters enable the consolidation of "Indianness" in Canada.

Set in Vancouver, both stories establish how Mootoo's narrators are precariously situated "on the edge of 'foreign' cultures" (Bhabha 199) — Indian and Canadian. Yet the demands of discursive address in Canada force them to align with standardized Indian cultural practices in relation to food and Hinduism. Thus, contrary to Susan Billingham's observation that "assumptions based on skin colour constitute *only*

*one example* of the normative pressures faced on [Vancouver's] Main Street" (84; emphasis added), I argue that skin colour functions as the *primary* site for the policing of Indo-Trinidadian immigrants in "Out on Main Street" and "Upside-downness." Both diasporic Indians and white Canadians assume that Mootoo's protagonists are immigrants from India, and, when proven wrong, they do not review their own assumptions; instead, they censure the Indo-Trinidadians for their inadequate performance of compulsory Indianness. This essay argues that Indianness is normalized precisely through such identification of its lack or loss, and that this is followed by an attempt to discipline deviant bodies that do not fit within that expected norm. Mootoo portrays the effects of such dominant discourse and associated practices through her narrators' private anxieties over their failure to enact heteronormative and racialized scripts of Indianness and through their reactions to individuals and situations encountered in Vancouver's public spaces. Their concerted attempts to excavate their purportedly "lost" or "watered-down" Indian roots reflect their hope of "gathering signs of approval and acceptance" (Bhabha 199), or "hospitality," in Canada.

The stories bring to light the processes through which both diasporic Indians and white Canadians reproduce norms of Indianness, and how these norms work to erase particular histories and distinctions within the broader Indian diaspora. By repeatedly frustrating the mapping of India onto brown (diasporic) bodies, the stories underline the multiplicity of Indian diasporas and, in so doing, counter the way skin colour is "read" in Mootoo's Vancouver. Mootoo's focus on deterritorialized idioms of Indian food and Hindu religious rituals, while making intelligible the "scattering" of peoples (Bhabha 199) as a result of specific colonial histories, also advances our understanding of Indianness as a performance embedded in complex, and shifting, social and cultural relations within global cities.

Both "Out on Main Street" and "Upside-downness" play on dominant impulses — Canadian as well as Indian nationalist — to assign national or ethnic belonging based on skin colour. "Out on Main Street" begins with the Indo-Trinidadian narrator explaining that she is "shy to frequent" (45) Vancouver's Main Street, with its concentration of Indian shops, because of her inability to speak an Indian language, her lack of knowledge of Indian cultural practices, and her queer sexuality. In

"Upside-downness," Meghan, a white Canadian, who is enamored with India, in a music store, initiates conversation with the narrator — a stranger — on the assumption that she is from India. With these face-to-face encounters forcing the narrators to reflect on their relation to India, much of the tension in the stories arises from their experiences and recognition of hostility/hospitality in urban spaces: in a sweet shop in "Out on Main Street" and in a music store in "Upside-downness." While mundane, these repeated encounters with normative Indianness make Mootoo's queer immigrants alert to what Homi K. Bhabha characterizes as "the power of the eye to naturalize the rhetoric of national affiliation and its form of collective expression" (205).

At the same time, however, their misrecognition as immigrants from India, based exclusively on skin colour, points to the limits of this phenotypic approach to racialization. Misrecognition prompts the narrators to engage with a complex history that connects Trinidad to India. In so doing, they educate their readers about the history of indentured labor in the Caribbean, particularly after the abolition of slavery in Trinidad where, from 1845 to 1917, indentured laborers from India were brought in to work on sugar plantations. By gesturing toward this ancestral passage — the global transport of "coolies" to plantation colonies in the Caribbean, Mauritius, Fiji, and South Africa — both stories poignantly historicize the most recent border crossing by their protagonists. Mootoo's misread racialized immigrant bodies insist that readers stretch their historical imaginations beyond conventional visualizations and interrogate the purported fixity of cultural practices across space and time.

By delineating the Indo-Trinidadians' shifting relationship with the Indian "homeland" across three generations, the stories direct attention to the specificity and temporality of Indian diasporic experiences and practices. In the process of remembering their upbringing in Trinidad, the narrators illuminate how the first generation of Indians tried to keep alive memories of the homeland through religious festivals and traditional foods. Hindu religious practices and food repeatedly emerge in the stories as the means to keep India alive in Trinidad. Yet the stories also suggest that the strident attempts to maintain and affirm the borders between Hindus and others, as well as between Indians and others, made it difficult for the second generation of Hindu Indo-Trinidadians, such as Mootoo's narrators, to assert their belonging to

Trinidad. The heteronormative imperatives of Trinidadian national culture further exacerbated the lesbian narrators' marginalization in Trinidad. Consequently, in recalling their childhoods, Mootoo's female narrators do not produce an exilic tale of longing for a romanticized and idealized Trinidadian past. Rather, their narratives unsettle the dominant idealization of Trinidad as Paradise. In the colonialist imagination, Mimi Sheller notes, the Caribbean is "highly over-determined by the long history of literary and visual representations of the tropical island as Paradise" (37). On the contrary, Mootoo's stories explain how this "perpetual garden of Eden in which visitors can indulge all their desires" (Sheller 13) functions as a site of surveillance for those who actually live there. The stories offer telling details of the policing of pleasure and desire "back home" along lines of gender, race, sexuality, and religion. This is illustrated in "Upside-downness," for instance, by the narrator's account of coming out: "When my mother found out (a story in itself) that I preferred the company of women, she said that I had put a knife in her heart, but when she heard that the object of this preference was Muslim, she said that I had shoved the knife deeper and twisted it in her Hindu heart" (113).

Nor does Canada open up hospitable spaces for these non-heteronormative Indo-Trinidadians. The limits of Canadian hospitality become evident when the narrators' brownness requires validation through their successful performance of standardized Indianness. For example, the narrator in "Out on Main Street" anxiously strives to mute both her lesbianism and her Trinidadian identity in public spaces. She anticipates condescension from Main Street Indians for her unfeminine behavior and androgynous attire. Seeking to successfully pass as a heterosexual female, she carefully practices her gait — "a jiggly-wiggly kind a walk" (48) — before going shopping on Main Street. Once on Main Street, she pauses to practice the names of various sweets before entering an Indian sweet shop. She enters the shop only when she is "confident enough dat I wouldn't make a fool a mih Brown self by asking what dis one name? and what dat one name?" (49). Such feelings of anxiety and insecurity reveal how food is embedded in nationalist discourses of authenticity and citizenship. This relationship is also demonstrated in "Upside-downness," where the narrator feels pressured to display her culinary belongingness to India in order to gain acceptance in Canada. The narrator of "Upside-downness" prefers cappuccino over "chai" or

“lassi” (113) and states her “intense intolerance of Indian food” (114). Yet, on her arrival in Canada, she faces demands to offer lessons in Indian cooking. Afraid of “disappointing people” and losing the “chance to make any friends” (117) in a new country, she quickly buys a cookbook to learn how to cook Indian food.

Even as Mootoo’s narrators strive to prove their Indianness by meeting normative expectations and by crafting new ways of being and living in Canada, the narratives clarify that Indian diasporic subjects do not relate to India in the same way. The rehearsing of the names of Indian sweets by the narrator in “Out on Main Street,” and the narrator in “Upside-downness” learning to cook Indian cuisine despite not enjoying it, all in an effort to fit in, establishes the singularity of their bodies as the site for countering the reduction of disparate subjectivities into a homogeneous Indianness. Their intentional performances of Indianness speak to the differences within the Indian diaspora and at the same time reveal how the demand to fit in is reproduced (and extended) in everyday living practices in Canadian cities.

In his provocative reflections on hospitality, Jacques Derrida points out that there is a semantic and etymological link “between *hostis* as host and *hostis* as enemy,” and hence “between hospitality and hostility” (15). He argues that hospitality is inextricably interwoven with hostility, since it requires that the host — the one who offers hospitality — must be one in authority in his/her home (4). Hospitality is a giving gesture, but it is characterized by a limitation, according to Derrida (4), for the host welcomes/invites the guest into his/her home with its attendant rules to which the guest becomes subject. In this way, the guest is allowed to enter the host’s space (shop, home, city, nation, etc.) under conditions that the host has determined. Derrida notes that the conditional hospitality of *invitation* entails that the master remains the master, the host remains the host at home, and the guest remains an invited guest (4). Derrida’s deconstructive reading of the contradictions inherent in (conditional) hospitality allows us to tease out the implications of the welcome offered to, and perceived by, Mootoo’s narrators.

While the welcoming of Indo-Trinidadians as customers in “Out on Main Street” and as friends in “Upside-downness” calls attention to hospitality as a practice of power, the “misnaming” of Indian food and consuming bodies in the stories also render the definitions of host/guest and native/stranger as unstable, contingent, and contextual cat-

egories. In "Out on Main Street," the immigrant narrator's memory of Indian food creates a conceptual link to her Indian roots via Trinidad, elicits nostalgic memories of festivities and gatherings in Trinidad, *and* suggests possibilities for creating community in Canada. At the same time, her inability to assign "correct" names to Indian sweets registers her distance from her ancestral homeland and becomes the grounds for exclusion in Vancouver's Main Street. In the shopkeeper's self-assured enquiry, "Where are you from?," the narrator discerns a tone that is "half-pitying, half-laughing at dis Indian-in-skin-colour-only" (51). This exchange gets complicated further when later in the story the shopkeeper turns out to be also a diasporic Indian — a Fijian of Indian ancestry. The story clarifies that it is by exhibiting his mastery over territorialized knowledge and through the public outing of his Indo-Trinidadian customers as "watered-down Indians," not "good grade A Indians" (45), that the Indo-Fijian can establish his relative closeness to India in comparison to fellow diasporic Indians.

Yet, by opening up a narrative space for cultural contestation, Mootoo, in my reading, allows the narrator to insert her voice and experience, and to in effect shift the ground of knowledge and the ownership of knowledge. In discussing how South Asian diasporic writing routes memory and a nostalgic longing for a homeland through culinary tastes and practices, Anita Mannur analyzes the complex battle that unfolds around the (un) naming of Indian food in "Out on Main Street." She observes that the narrator is able to mark her "culinary kinship to Indianness, without claiming the nation-state of 'India' as . . . home" (22-23). In "refusing to grant primacy to his [the shopkeeper's] logic of naming," Mannur holds that the narrator refuses to "publicly affirm an exclusionary, chauvinistic version of [Indian] citizenship" that delegitimizes her experiences as an Indo-Trinidadian (24). The textual repetition of this act of refusal, I think, is also significant. In response to the shopkeeper's initial correction, "That is korma, Miss," the narrator asserts, "Where I come from we does call dat meethai." To further prove her claim, she orders a sugarcake, and when again corrected ("That is called chum-chum, Miss"), she retorts, "Yeh, well back home we does call dat sugarcake, Mr. Chum-chum" (51). It is through her repeated refusal to be corrected, followed by her parodic naming of the shopkeeper, that the narrator consolidates her emphatic disavowal of pure genealogies, while directing attention to the multiplicity of "homes" of the Indian diaspora.

The polyphonic articulation of Indianness that unfolds in this humorous exchange in the shop suggests that the local/national is itself a constructed and a contested site. Pointing to the semantic instability in the names of Indian sweets across different diasporic locations, the story inscribes the specific locality of cultural systems and thus insists that the narrator's difference is legitimate. In contrast, Billingham interprets this episode as rendering familiar foods "unfamiliar by local variants in name, ingredients, and so on," which then establishes the Indo-Trinidadian narrator's "cultural inauthenticity" and "illegitimacy" (79). But the narrator's insistent rejoinder that Indian sweets bear different names in Trinidad ("kheer" *is* "sweetrice" and "chum-chum" *is* "sugarcake" in Trinidad), I would argue, resists the constant pressure to look backward to India. Instead, it asks the reader to look toward India in Trinidad and, eventually, as the narrative progresses, to how India travels to Canada.

In both "Out on Main Street" and "Upside-downness," Indian food is a key site for the narrators' contested negotiations with other members of the Indian diaspora and with white Canadians. Mootoo unequivocally locates Indian food within the domestic in Trinidad. The narrator in "Out on Main Street" says that Indians in Trinidad are "kitchen Indians: some kind a Indian food every day, at least once a day" (45), while in "Upside-downness," the narrator says, "India was at home in Trinidad" (111). Not surprisingly, the narrators' culinary affiliation, or "culinary kinship" (Mannur 22), invokes familial memories of mothers and grandmothers "back home." However, this does not automatically reinstate the domain of the home or the domestic because the site for the consumption of Indian food shifts to public venues in Canada: restaurants and temples. This strategic repositioning calls attention to the specificity of diasporic locations and to the shifting subject positions in displaced settings, whether Trinidad or Canada. It urges readers to attend to the lived historical memories and experiences — the "different re-departures, different pauses, different arrivals," to borrow from Trinh T. Minh-ha (328) — that speak to the plurality of identities and the fraught relationship between present and past locations that produce particular forms of diasporic Indianness.

This shift of emphasis from Indianness as congenital to Indianness as performative accomplishment in particular diasporic locations is carefully delineated in the story "Upside-downness." As the title of the



story lightheartedly indicates, the narrator realizes that unlike her white childhood tutor in Trinidad, who wanted to “bleach” out her brownness, white Canadians “want to be brown” like her (112). Difference is not denounced but celebrated by Canadians like Meghan and Virginia, who are “genuine in their desire to be Indians” (115). Similar to “Out on Main Street,” performances of Indianness in this story once again coalesce around Indian food and Hindu religious practices. But, in demonstrating how Indianness is performed not only by diasporic Indians but also by white Canadians, “Upside-downness” further destabilizes the categories of host and guest.

The white Canadians’ performance of Indianness advances Mootoo’s troubling of the easy alignment of Indianness with those who “look” brown (as in “Out on Main Street”), but it also puts the twice-displaced narrator in a double bind. The narrator of “Upside-downness” quickly recognizes that she has to position herself not only in relation to “real” Indians from India, but also against the performances of Indianness by her white Canadian friends, who, she remarks, were “better Indians than I” (118). As both Indians and non-Indians emerge as mutually constitutive of standardized Indianness in Canada, the narrator discovers a new and urgent need to learn about her Indian heritage. This narrator, who is both immigrant and lesbian, had hoped to cultivate new forms of sociality and solidarity with queer subjects, but she soon finds herself forced to excavate her Indian roots. For Meghan and Virginia, their performative enactments of Indianness, which entail eating Indian food, performing Hindu religious rituals, and speaking Hindi, appear as a lifestyle choice. They seem to have the freedom to choose certain popular versions of Indianness, whereas the Indo-Trinidadian narrator (marked as ethnic by skin colour) does not. Unlike Meghan and Virginia, who “frequently visited India” (113), or “His Holiness, a White man in orange,” whose sermon on the *Bhagavad Gita* at the Hare-Krishna temple involves repeatedly asking his devotees to “Go to India . . . with the privilege of having done so himself several times” (120-21), the narrator “can’t afford” (112) to go to India. Her white friends solve her problem by offering to help her recuperate her Indianness in Canada. The narrator in “Out on Main Street” seems to be correct in her observation that Canada “[i]s de next best thing to going to India” (47).

In “Upside-downness,” Meghan and Virginia seek out the proxim-

ity of Indians. Yet their hospitality to diasporic Indians such as the Indo-Trinidadian narrator does not inaugurate new formulations of community. Their openness to Indian cultural practices does not entail “opening . . . [themselves] to strangers” or “imagining a more heterogeneous sociality” (Ahmed 113). Here, hospitality disguises power as their acceptance of the narrator is contingent upon her neatly fitting into a standardized pattern of the exotic Indian. This gives credence to Sara Ahmed’s poignant critique of Western multiculturalism. Ahmed argues that “the act of ‘welcoming the stranger’” or the “‘acceptance’ of difference actually serves to conceal . . . differences” (95). Ahmed also insists that “the multicultural nation remains predicated on a prior act of *differentiating between differences*” (107). That is, certain differences are tolerated, and there are differentiated racializations of immigrant communities in the name of liberal inclusion or multiculturalism. Writing in the Canadian context, Eva Mackey explores how “liberal ‘tolerance’ is mobilized to manage populations and also to create identities” (18). Mackey’s argument highlights how power and dominance function through liberal, inclusionary, and pluralistic practices, “seemingly based on *inclusion and tolerance* rather than erasure and homogeneity” (16), to consolidate the identity of the dominant Canadian majority as white and anglophone.

In light of Ahmed’s, Mackey’s, and Derrida’s theoretical explorations of liberal inclusion or hospitality, Meghan’s and Virginia’s hospitality toward the racial other appears to stem from their perceived sense of authority over Indian cultural practices and the privilege of mobility that allows them to travel to India at will or relocate from Toronto to Vancouver to be “closer to India” (“Upside-downness” 116). Also, Meghan and Virginia as hosts choose to initiate friendship with the Indo-Trinidadian narrator, and, then, they wield power over their guest by defining the conditions of hospitality. The white couple wants the narrator to submit to their attempts to fit her into a normative model of Indianness. Since Meghan’s and Virginia’s fascination with difference (in this context, India) does not create a more open, interconnected world view, they inevitably marginalize the narrator. Because they assume that India and the Indian diaspora are self-identical, without any differences between or within them, the minoritized narrator’s complex history both baffles Meghan and Virginia and awakens their anxieties. Unable to grasp the multilayered complexities and intercon-

nections across space and time created by global flows of peoples and cultural encounters in global cities like Vancouver, they define “the specific limits of tolerable difference” (Mackey 29). Their seeming embrace of difference, as Derrida puts it, “forbids in some way even what it seems to allow to cross the threshold to pass across it. It becomes the threshold” (14). This “threshold” in “Upside-downness” is elaborated through Mootoo’s Indophiles who draw a straight line from brown to India, between *ethnos* and territory, and want to “rub back in the brown that her [the narrator’s] childhood tutor, Mrs. Ramsey, tried so hard to bleach out” (112). This makes evident not only the ahistorical rigidity of Meghan’s and Virginia’s fascination with the exotic other, but also how in their strident attempts to produce their version of a “true” Indian diasporic subject they end up reproducing difference.

The tension between the tolerance of, and the refusal of, certain kinds of difference is explicit in this story. With the intent of repairing the narrator’s disrupted history and colonial placing, Meghan and Virginia seek to initiate her into Hindu religious practices. They invite the narrator to a Hare-Krishna worship ceremony so that she can “learn a little” about her “own culture” (117). But the transplanted rituals of the Hare-Krishnas do not offer the narrator any sense of a continuous past or reinforce her new longings for India. Rather, the experience makes her question her friends’ performances. She wonders, “[W]ho came first, the White followers or the Indian ones. Who converted whom?” (118). Her agitated inner dialogues gesture to the re-routing of Indianness through such transnational practices as the Hare-Krishnas. Pointing to the manufacturing and transformation of localized and marginal Hindu religious practices, such as Hare-Krishna, into hegemonic practices in the discourse of the West, the story asks us to attend to how India travels to diasporic spaces.

It is also significant that for Meghan and Virginia, Hindus, who are the majority in India, constitute the repository of the Indian nation. They view Hinduism as interchangeable with Indian national culture, and hence with ethnicity. Ignoring the many religions in India, the numerous denominations and differences within Hinduism, and the historically constructed particularities of their Indo-Trinidadian friend, they consolidate majoritarian and orientalist notions of pure and discrete cultural entities tied to geographies. The narrator, on the other hand, allows us to see how select Hindu religious-cultural practices are

detrterritorialized and consumed by onlookers and devotees across the globe; in so doing she enlightens us about the complex desires that saturate the orientalist trope of the spiritual, mystical India or “the East.”

The performance of Indianness becomes a site of complex cultural contest when the seemingly Indian-looking narrator feels “shown-up as a cultural ignoramus” (119) wearing T-shirt and slacks in the Hare-Krishna temple while the two white women wear elaborate saris. At the temple, the narrator finds “[t]he other Brown folk, on the periphery of the room, not at all central to the goings-on” (120). The narrator’s unease at the racism that underlies the affected Indianness of the white devotees in the temple reaches its climax when, midway through the sermon, a young man comes to fetch the “Brown women” to help serve the food, crossing over the men and the white women worshippers. The narrator feels a “familiar burning,” “an urgent rage” (121), and Meghan, following the narrator’s gaze, immediately picks up on the sexist gesture, unaware of her own complicity in this blatant display of racism along with sexism. The narrator’s unflinching gaze and her “too tight a fist wanting to impact with history” (121), on the other hand, testify to her first-hand knowledge of racial discrimination. These characters’ different readings of the incident in the temple bring into sharper focus how lesbians of colour perceive and live difference in ways that are often distinct from a broader queer community. The fracturing of gender experience is a hint that the narrator’s friendship with Meghan and Virginia cannot be sustained for very long, as she cannot be fully accepted or understood by her white friends.

The asymmetries of intercultural encounter in the two stories stress the need for a historicized and contextualized understanding of the multiplicity of Indian diasporas and their multiple routes of arrival in Canada. Both stories demonstrate the narrators’ gradual realization that they have to continually negotiate their relations with white and brown Canadians and other diasporic Indians. The new forms of community that emerge in “Out on Main Street” and “Upside-downness” are, therefore, fraught with struggles and exclusions. They are characterized more by difference and contingency than by any idyllic sense of acceptance and belonging. Consequently, “coming out” on Vancouver’s Main Street does not entail a public assertion of the narrators’ multiple national affiliations (and disaffiliations) or of their lesbianism. Rather, “coming out” for Mootoo’s narrators emerges as being doubly outed as

a “cultural bastard” (“Out on Main Street” 51), or “cultural orphan” (“Upside-downness” 117), and as a lesbian.<sup>3</sup> For example, in “Out on Main Street,” the narrator’s sense of self takes a beating when she meets Indians who immigrated to Canada directly. She explains, “I used to think I was a Hindu par excellence until I come up here and see real flesh and blood Indian from India. Up here, I learning ’bout all kind a custom and food and music and clothes dat we never see or hear ’bout in good ole Trinidad” (47). As relocation to Canada becomes the touchstone for the narrator’s own self-explorations, “real flesh and blood Indians from India” (47) alert her to the possibility of derision for failing to perform normative Indian cultural practices. She notices that “Indian store clerk[s] on Main Street doh have no patience with us, specially when we talking English to them. . . . And den dey look at yuh disdainful disdainful — like yuh disloyal, like yuh is a traitor” (47-48). Yet, in the sweet shop, when two inebriated white men enter and harass the shopkeeper, the customers, who are all brown immigrants, despite being divided by gender, religion, sexuality, class, and nationality, rally together to express their solidarity with the diasporic Indian shopkeeper. But this momentary alignment breaks down with the entry of the narrator’s openly lesbian friends revealing her queer sexuality, and this is followed by visible signs of hostility directed at her.<sup>4</sup> Pointing to this difficult process of constructing cultural identities resistant to mechanisms of national and sexual regulation, Gayatri Gopinath writes, “any form of transgression on the part of women may result in their literal and symbolic exclusion from the multiple ‘homes’ that they as immigrant women inhabit: the patriarchal, heterosexual household, the extended ‘family’ made up of an immigrant community, and the national spaces of both India and the host nation” (208). Mootoo’s careful delineation of the shifting boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, as well as the partial belonging of her characters, exhibits these difficulties and these multiple sites of struggle encountered by her queer diasporics.

Pointing to the different histories and temporalities of the Indian diaspora in Canada, the narrators’ localized urban experiences additionally suggest to readers that “it may not always be possible to make a coherent connection with those historical subjects that we recognize as ‘like us’” (Hanawa 81). Both “Out on Main Street” and “Upside-downness” facilitate Mootoo’s historicization of the narrators’ connec-

tion to India via Trinidad and their failures to perform compulsory Indianness because of their displacement and queer sexuality. Thus, we are faced with the challenge of retrieving traces of multiple histories and pasts that confound the homogenization of groups and individuals based on skin colour, for, as Bhabha writes, “the adding *to* does not add up” (232).

In queer theory, Judith Butler is acclaimed for identifying the repetitions required to maintain heterosexual hegemony:

The “reality” of heterosexual identities is performatively constituted through an imitation that sets itself up as the origin and the round of all imitations. In other words, heterosexuality is always in the process of imitating and approximating its own phantasmic idealization of itself — and *failing*. Precisely because it is bound to fail, and yet endeavors to succeed, the project of heterosexual identity is propelled into an endless repetition of itself. (“Imitation” 21)

Butler’s argument that heterosexual identities are constituted through repetitive performances is pertinent to Indian cultural identities as well, and this is clearly elaborated in Mootoo’s narratives. Moreover, as with heterosexuality, this repetition is bound to fail, as the ideal Indianness (in the context of Mootoo’s stories) can never, once and for all, be achieved. The Indo-Fijian’s and the white Canadians’ performances of Indianness, in “Out on Main Street” and “Upside-downness,” respectively, are linked in their mutual impossibility and their mutual incomprehensibility. Their achievement of Indianness is bound to fail since it is temporal and relational, contingent on establishing the Indo-Trinidadians’ distance from normative Indianness. Yet the onlookers also fail to comprehend the multiple subjectivities of Mootoo’s fictional Indo-Trinidadians, and both Indians and white Canadians in “Out on Main Street” and “Upside-downness” insist on locating India as the originary home of *all* brown peoples across the globe. Thus, incorporating Butler’s theory of gender performativity into the discussion of performing Indianness, one can argue that Indianness offers normative “positions that are intrinsically impossible to embody, and the persistent failure to identify fully and without incoherence with these positions reveals” how the performance of Indian cultural identity is “an intrinsic comedy, a constant parody of itself” (*Gender* 122).

In “Out on Main Street,” the vehement attempts of Mootoo’s Main Street Indians to establish their claim over a “homeland” left behind

and, in “Upside-downness,” the white Canadian couple’s impetus to divert the Indo-Trinidadians into excavating their Indianness (on their terms), also raise questions about the placing of groups within the Canadian nation space: Who does and does not — and to what extent — belong within the Canadian national imaginary? By positing Indo-Trinidadians as belonging elsewhere, “as out of place, in this place” (Ahmed 101), both diasporic Indians (“Out on Main Street”) and white Canadians (“Upside-downness”) attempt to regulate difference and consolidate their national identities. Efforts are entirely directed at transforming Indo-Trinidadians into standardized Indians, rather than welcoming them as Canadians. Following Derrida’s argument, hospitality is here reaffirming that “this is mine, I am at home, you are welcome in my home, without any implication of ‘make yourself at home’” (14). With Canada emerging paradoxically as the locus for the production, consolidation, and contestation of normative Indianness, the stories point to the limits of the Canadian multicultural nation, or multicultural hospitality, as offering “a way of ‘living’ in the nation, and a way of living *with* difference” (Ahmed 95).

The emphasis on performing select scripts of Indianness in Canada concentrates attention on the affects of hospitality. The stories suggest that relocation to Canada calls for different levels of negotiation between myriad classed, racialized, sexualized, and gendered subjects functioning in close proximity, and in relation, to each other. Instead of invoking the narrators’ crisis in identity in order to resolve it, the stories offer a detailed accounting of their rage, disappointments, and anxieties. In doing so, the stories accentuate the limits of various kinds of hospitality, while delineating the narrators’ interrogations of, and resistance to, incorporation within restrictive notions of nation and race.

Giving voice to marginalized genders, counternormative sexualities, and differentially racialized brown immigrant bodies, “Out on Main Street” and “Upside-downness” direct the reader’s attention to the historical specificities of displacement and oppression. The rationality of race, gender, and differentialized ethnicity in Vancouver makes Mootoo’s narrators increasingly aware of the need to define themselves because they constantly find that they are already defined by their brownness. Thus, the narratives persistently trouble what is assumed to be self-evident about the identity of the narrators, that is, their Indianness. While both the Indians who immigrated to Canada

from India and the white Canadians insist that the narrators erase their multiple and discrepant affiliations and perform standardized norms of Indianness, the narrators assert their resistance and their singularity through their narrations. Using oral modes of storytelling and Trinidadian English, they affirm their difference as products of particular histories and spaces. As the narratives progress, we find the narrators becoming increasingly aware of how they are positioned by specific practices of looking in Canada. They reciprocate by redirecting the reader's gaze toward dominant discourses and bodies, and by insisting on being recognized as Indo-Trinidadians. In the process, they reveal how India travels from, and to, different diasporic locations. More importantly, they account for differences within the many Indian diasporic populations in Canada that might share a heritage but understand and experience diasporic consciousness differently.

In illustrating how India travels from the homeland to the diaspora and from one diaspora to another, "Out on Main Street" and "Upside-downness" deftly interrogate nationalist models of thinking and dwelling. Mootoo's queer immigrants make evident the tenuous nature of the Indian diaspora's links to India, effectively foiling the linear mapping of specific bodies on to nations, of brown skin with India. Their multiple negotiations of Indianness in Canada redefine Indianness as *doing* — performing specific cultural scripts — rather than as *being* Indian. In the process, they render "home" not as the idealized, forever lost Indian or Trinidadian past, but as a home produced in the context of living in Canada. Calling on readers to "imagin[e] a more heterogeneous sociality" (Ahmed 113), the stories insist on a rethinking of dominant notions of hospitality in order to work toward making the future habitable.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Mootoo's short fiction has been largely ignored by scholars, especially in comparison to her first novel, *Cereus Blooms at Night*. While the story "Out on Main Street" has received some critical attention, albeit limited (see Mannur, Schneider, Billingham), there is, to my knowledge, no published work on "Upside-downness."

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of other stories in the collection, see Chakraborty.

<sup>3</sup> In light of Mootoo's remarks in an interview that "being lesbian/of colour is the foundation or world view from which all my work undoubtedly arise[s]" (Dhaliwal 24), these two stories can be viewed also as representing Mootoo's own "coming out" in Canada both as Indo-Trinidadian and as lesbian.



<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of these “shifting allegiances,” see Billingham (85-87) and Schneider.

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